

## ESSAY

### Look at the World Through Women's Eyes

©by Susan Platt first published *Dallas Morning News* October 4, 1995



The main point of the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum or NGO Forum on Women in Huairou, China was not the nervous concerns of Chinese officials. (Imagine how the Dallas police would feel if almost thirty thousand feminists came here!)

Nor was it mainly about confrontational demonstrations such as those seen in the American television coverage.

It was about thousands of women and men looking for positive solutions to the problems of poverty, access to health and education and violence against all women on the planet.

The slogan of the conference was Equality, Development, and Peace. The Forum included over 26,000 women and men from 186 member states of the United Nations. Many of the women came from Asia, Africa and Polynesia. There was a thrilling cultural diversity and a pervasive enjoyment and respect for that diversity. Among the Moslem women for example there were women with no veil, women with only a veil on their heads, and women who were covered except for their eyes. The delegation from India included women of all castes. Japanese women came, in spite of the fact that China was marking the anniversary of the Japanese invasion of China. These women were all influential in their communities and in their countries, or they would not have managed to get to China at all. I could feel their strength just by looking at them. They were not the people that you would encounter as a tourist in these countries.

Much more significant than the difficulty of traveling to China or within China were the difficulties that these women had personally surmounted in their own lives and in the lives of the communities from which they came.

All of the women at the NGO conference were grass roots organizers who were really making a difference in the world. In the midst of all the diversity, everyone shared the same commitment to the idea that women's rights are human rights. The purpose of the NGO conference was to be an activist lobby to influence the more official United Nations government conference in Beijing to address this principle.

I went to the NGO Forum with a national and international delegation representing the Women's Caucus for Art, a feminist art organization. We included artists from throughout the United States that represented a wide range of ethnicity, as well as from Canada, Ireland, Great Britain, Mexico, and Korea. Our panels, workshops, performances and videos addressed the same issues as others at the conference, violence against women, the importance of community, the role of collaboration, and concern for environmental problems. We presented art as a means for peaceful solutions to global concerns. Our lobby to the United Nations protested the obstruction and suppression of artistic expression.

In the USA you heard about Hillary Clinton's speech. We were all deeply affected by her sincerity and intelligence, as well as her diplomacy in addressing the question of human rights internationally. But we were also excited to hear an interview with Prime Minister Muhtarma Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan who spoke of herself as a role model for Moslem women. The Forum was actually opened by Nobel Peace Laureate Ang San Sun Kyi of Burma who spoke through a televised speech:” As the shackles of prejudice and intolerance fall from our own limbs we can together strive to identify and remove the impediments to human development everywhere.”

I was also riveted by other keynote speakers.

Susana Ounei-Small was a dynamic representative from Kanaky or French New Caledonia. She has been an activist with the Pacific Concerns Resource Center for thirty years. She spoke forcefully of the nuclear testing in the Pacific and how it would affect the life of the people in Polynesia.

Maria Kurbasova of Russia represented the GAIA International Women's Center. She passionately described how her group helped mothers to find their sons during the war in Chechnya. Catriona Ruane of the Centre for Research and Documentation came from Northern Ireland to speak of colonization as the underlying reason for militarization and violence in that tormented country. Ruane emphasized the dilemma of her own life caught between her desire to make the world safer for her three year old daughter by speaking and organizing, or by simply staying home with her in a place filled with violence.

In addition to these and other prominent speakers, there were also panels led by local grassroots organizers who are working in less famous places to make their street or their home a better place. They came to the NGO to speak of their successes and to find advice for their problems.

A veterinary specialist from Kenya was helping women in Masai tribes to share their techniques for treating sick animals and compiling records so that their knowledge is not lost. A teacher trainer from South Africa ( there were two hundred women from that country alone) was looking for strategies to gain funding for the most basic facilities for schools. Six women from the Asian Women's Human Rights Council presented their solutions to housing problems for people living in slum conditions. Maori women from

New Zealand told of creating 29 affiliated groups to address the problems of their colonized culture even without any access to government and power. Women from the Ivory Coast, Uganda, Nigeria, Mozambique and Ghana shared a panel on the problems of the girl child in Africa that spoke of female circumcision, child labor, and prostitution .

On an even more informal level in hundreds of inflatable tents near the main conference buildings, there were workshops and strategy sessions. Women from Iran addressed the question of fundamentalism, women from India of the tradition of arranged child marriage. The Women's World Bank spoke of economic empowerment for women through tiny seed grants. A woman from Honduras spoke of a craft cooperative that was bypassing middlemen and making money for its participants. There were workshops on the use of toxic pesticides, access to equal educational opportunities, and solutions to violence against women of all ages. These small workshops offered answers that people could take home. One of the themes of the conference was that in a violent world it is women and children who are the victims and the refugees. The disruption and destruction of home and family is the inevitable result of war. The NGO Forum on Women and its more official partner, the Fourth UN Conference on Women, are beginning to create the mechanisms to change that. I came home full of hope for the future. I now know that there are strong forces offering alternatives to violence in the world. I have seen them in action. ©by Susan Platt first published Dallas Morning News October 4, 1995